



Bug man
Entomologist turns
showman and tours
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WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL

OUTSTANDING IN HIS FIELD

Curator of traveling bug show just loves that return to boyhood

By Ron Seely
Science reporter

JANESVILLE — Being the keeper of a traveling bug show has its exciting moments. There was the cry, for example, of the Jefferson Elementary School fifth-grader who was bent over one of entomologist Tony Gustin's live insect displays. "Oh my God! They're MAT-ING!"

Gustin, curator of "The Creepy Crawly Zoo," the state's only traveling, live insect exhibit, didn't miss a beat.

"Well," Gustin said. "Think of it as wrestling."

As a boy growing up in Milwaukee, Gustin, like most kids, loved bugs because they are indeed creepy and crawly and just a little bit yucky. What more could a kid want?

"I'd catch butterflies and let them go in my bedroom," Gustin remembered. "I'd drive my mom crazy."

Friday, showing the fifth-graders at Jefferson here around his Creepy Crawly Zoo, Gustin was like a kid again. Reviving that feeling — of being a kid with a strange bug in your pocket — was a big part of why Gustin became an entomologist and why he started the traveling exhibit about a year and a half ago as he wrapped up his studies at UW-Madison.

Gustin wanted to let kids know it's OK to pluck a bug off a tree and study it, and maybe even take it home to terrorize mom. And he wanted to do it with live bugs instead of dead bugs speared on pins in a display case.

"They're cool. They move," Gustin told the Janesville students of the bugs he'd brought to show them (including a Sonoran giant



Students at Jefferson Elementary School in Janesville are captivated by Gustin's presentation on butterflies and exotic creatures.

centipede that eats small mice). "That's a lot better than watching dead stuff. It's like in the field; there's no glass between you and a walking stick. You can touch it. You can take it off a branch and put it in your pocket and take it home and show your mom. That's

what entomology is all about. . . Now, who's not afraid to eat a bug?"

"Me! Me! Me!" came the responses.

"You guys scare me," Gustin said.

Nobody ate a bug, of course.

INFORMATION: If you're a teacher and you'd like a bunch of live bugs in your classroom, you can contact Tony Gustin. Write Gustin at The Creepy Crawly Zoo, Tony Gustin, 5483-A S Lake Drive, Cudahy, Wis. 53110. Or you can call him at (414) 769-0413.

Gustin charges \$350 for an entire school day of sessions but lesser programs can be arranged for \$125 per session.

Readers in the Janesville area can catch Gustin on a Marcus Cable television show that was shot Friday at Jefferson. The show will air at 7 p.m. Dec. 16 on Community News and Views on Channel 20.

But Gustin did point out that many people around the world do eat insects and that cheese-flavored meal worms aren't that bad.

What other buggy knowledge did Gustin pass along? Consider:

- Not all creepy, crawly things are insects. Spiders aren't insects. They're arachnids whose cousins

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Entomologist Tony Gustin travels around the state with a live bug show, called "The Creepy Crawly Zoo," to teach youngsters about the insect world. During Gustin's recent visit to Jefferson Elementary in Janesville, fifth-grader Laura Davidson handles a big — but harmless — scorpion.

Bugs

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include ticks and scorpions. Like insects, they are arthropods, all of which have exoskeletons and jointed legs. If you've eaten a lobster, Gustin told the kids, then you've eaten an arthropod.

"Ewww!" the kids said.

"You say 'ewwww' now," Gustin replied. "But they were good with butter weren't they?"

Arachnids all have eight legs and two body parts. Insects, on the other hand, all have six legs and three body parts.

■ Insects have been around for 350 million years, longer than the dinosaurs.

■ No species of tarantula has a bite that's truly dangerous to humans, although its bite can hurt.

■ The word "bug" comes from the Gaelic "bwg," which means ghost or spirit.

Years ago, the Celts used to sleep on hay mattresses. They didn't change their mattresses that often and they'd wake up with mysterious bites and welts on their faces. They couldn't see the bed bugs that were biting them because the bugs hid during the day. So the unknowing Celts said their problems were being caused by "bwgs."

As curator of a traveling bug exhibit, Gustin has had some interesting experiences. He keeps his bugs in his bedroom and there was the unfortunate time when his girlfriend found herself staring at a tarantula that was staring back at her from a wall just inches away.

As important as the lessons about insects and other tiny creatures, Gustin said, are the lessons he passes on to the children about being who you want to be in life.

"They can be whoever they want to be," Gustin said. "I mean I created this job. . . Now, when I go camping, it's a business expense."